HIDING FROM LIFE

June 25, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 9:18-24
I Kings 19:9-14

"...he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" I Kings 19:9 (RSV)

I have always been intrigued by the advice a poet, Ranier Maria Rilke, offered to a young man wondering what to do with his life and considering writing poetry. Rilke's famous advice was to avoid writing poetry unless he simply had to...unless the poetry demanded to be written.

The assumption is that your destiny pursues you; the purpose of your life keeps knocking on the door until you open it. And that a good portion of human life is invested in the ultimately futile, if not tragic, attempt to avoid it, escape it, hide from it. Or, if you prefer a theological perspective - and I do - God is a relentless pursuer, who keeps on our trail, tracks us down and shows up not only in unlikely places, but precisely in those places we go in order to get away from Him.

In preparation for his recent visit, I skimmed through William Sloane Coffin's memoir, Once to Every Man, and read the passages I had under-lined ten years ago. One of them that got my attention then and still does, describes his decision to enter theological seminary. He had served in Army intelligence at the end of World War II, was completing his work at Yale and because he knew Russian language and culture was considering an invitation from the CIA to continue in government intelligence.

He describes his feelings about religion at the time:

"I was put off by the churches which were just then beginning to desert the city in droves, fleeing to the suburbs in search of their middle-class constituents. For another thing, I was unimpressed by many of the Christian students I met. Their answers seemed too pat, their submission to God too ready. It seemed to me that as with parents, so with God; too easy a submission is but a facade for repressed rebellion."

And then, partly because his uncle, Henry Sloane Coffin, had just retired as President of Union Theological Seminary in

New York, he accepted an invitation to college seniors to attend a conference at the seminary for students mildly interested in, but far from committed to the Christian faith. The first speaker was Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great American thinkers of this century. And what he said to the one hundred idealistic young people was all it took. He said, "Go into the ministry only if you lose the battle to stay out." Coffin sent a note of apology to the CIA and signed a seminary application form. [p. 87, 88]

There it is again. The idea of our vocation, our calling pursuing us, God tracking us down, and our trying to hide.

It is the theme of one of our oldest and best stories... the story of Elijah.

One of the difficulties we preachers have with the text is that the whole story of Elijah is a big one, almost too big to serve as a sermon text. But dividing it into more manageable chunks is not satisfactory either because it is one story. So sit back and relax and let me tell it to you. It has probably been a long time since you heard it in its entirety. It is a story that contains very contemporary truth. The time is the 9th century B.C. Ahab is the King of Israel, remembered among other things, because he married a foreigner, a Phoenician by the name of Jezebel. Now, there was an interesting woman!

Jezebel was the daughter of a Phoenician priest and a very devout woman. Her religion was Baalism, the primary religion of the land of Canaan, before the Israelites invaded and occupied it. It is a nature religion, essentially, focusing on the life force in the natural order, fertility and sexuality. There are two primary deities in Baalism: Baal and Asherah, a mother-goddess.

Jezebel was such an enthusiastic adherent of Baalism that when Ahab brought her home to Israel as his new queen, her royal entourage included an eyebrow-raising 450 Baal priests and 400 prophets.

Now Ahab obviously has a problem. His people worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Yahweh is the name of the God of Israel, noted for being one, not many. There is no room in the religion of Israel for other gods. Ahab not only has a mixed marriage to a very strong woman, he also has all these priests and prophets to feed, house and keep occupied; priests and prophets who slowly but surely do what they were brought to do - practice their religion. Not surprisingly, because it was the queen's religion and King Ahab seemed to be agnostic and tolerant, Baalism began to look pretty good to the movers and shakers in Israel. And before you knew it, prophets of Yahweh were persona-non-grata... and then they began to be persecuted, and some were actually executed.

Elijah enters the story at this point, travels from his

home in Gilead, makes an appointment to see the King and bluntly announces that because of Ahab's infidelity there will be a drought in the land. For two years the drought continues. Ahab is beginning to get the point apparently, because he summons Elijah back to the palace for a follow-up consultation. Elijah repeats his prophetic indictment and then challenges Jezebel's priests and prophets to a test of strength on Mt. Carmel. A crowed of people come to watch. Two bulls are slaughtered. The priests are challenged to call on their god, Baal, to send down fire. Elijah will call on Yahweh, God of Israel. The contest begins. The Baal priests try and try, becoming more and more frenzied, but nothing happens. In a remarkable sequence, when you consider that it's fully 2,800 years old, Elijah can't resist poking a little fun. "Perhaps your God is taking a nap - out to lunch...." Incredibly what the Hebrew really says, although no one has the nerve to translate it accurately, is "perhaps your God is taking a comfort break." Elijah prevails. Yahweh sends down fire - the people shout, "Yahweh is God" and slaughter all the Baal priests and prophets on the spot... And the rain begins to fall, ending the drought. Ahab, chastened, but pleased, actually, gratefully drives his chariot home through the rain storm with Elijah ecstatically running before him.

When Ahab arrives home he has some good news and bad news to share with his wife... The good news is that the drought is over. The bad news is that she no longer has any spiritual advisers, and that Elijah has done away with her personal chaplain staff. Jezebel is furious. She sends Elijah a message: In twenty-four hours you'll be as dead as my priests and prophets.

Sometimes one word can stop us in our tracks... That word from the Queen turns Elijah around. And the prophet, ecstatic the day before because of his victorious vindication is a fugitive again, running for his life.

On the way out of town Elijah stops long enough to consider simply giving up. "It is enough: Now, O Lord, take away my life," he says; but after an encounter with an angel gets back up and heads for a secret cave he knows about on Mt. Horeb, where some strange things happen. Wind, earthquakes, fire - none of which contain much of God, for a terrified prophet. But afterward "a still, small voice of calm," or more accurately "the sound of a gentle silence" and God's voice asking a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" What kind of a question is that? He's doing what anyone whose life was threatened ought to do... He's hiding.

There is a lot of truth in that old story... Jezebel is whatever can send you running for your life... And the cave is where you go. It is still a pretty popular spot. In fact it's getting crowded in the cave these days.

In a recent address at the General Assembly of the

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on the future, Roger Heyns, former Chancellor of the University of California at Berkley, predicted a general, wide-spread increase in anxiety because of the uncertainty and instability which have become so much a part of our world. All we can be certain of, it seems, is that things will be different tomorrow from what they are today. Change, ironically, is the only thing we can be sure of. That situation, in which we will have to live our lives, says Dr. Heyns, will often result in people turning to a myriad of escape devices. Those escape devices will include religious fundamentalism and political zealotry - authoritarian structures which impose the comfort of predictability, simplicity, stability and order.

It will be a long time before we comprehend the full meaning of what has transpired in China and we should not presume too much. And yet, it is abundantly clear that it is not difficult to persuade people that authoritarianism is safer than individual freedom... that stability and order are preferable to the wild unpredictability of liberty.

Latin American theologian, Don Helder, Camara warned long ago that after the enthusiasm, the commitment, the dedication without limits are crushed, the danger is that people will settle for safety and security and idealism will die. And that, it appears, is what is occurring in China. Life may be boring in the cave, but at least it is secure. It is a theme brilliantly and movingly explored in the motion picture "The Dead Poets Society."

If anxiety, which is simply unfocused fear, is a result of change and uncertainty, then you and I have plenty of reasons to be anxious.

There were three oil spills yesterday, dramatic reminders that the ecological clock is ticking. No one argues that the rain forests are not absolutely essential to the continuation of life on the planet. There is no way to survive without the oxygen they put back into the system. No one argues that it has not taken fifteen million years for the earth's rain forests to develop to the current ecological efficiency. And no one argues that they are not currently being burned down, cut down, destroyed at the rate of one acre per second. That is so unsettling that I'm happier not knowing about it, and when I hear it, I look for a cave to jump into it. I don't want to be accountable for that. So we look for a place to hide...

Professor Davie Napier, an Old Testament scholar, has written an excellent little book on the Elijah stories in which he comments on the currently popular hiding places:

"The range of caves runs from the old standards of sex and alcohol and other drugs to TA (Transactional Analysis), TM (Transcendental Meditation), TV (before whom, on an average we stand, sit, lie, eat and drink an unconscionable and unbelievable

amount of adult hours per week), TF (touchy-feely in dual or group encounter), TZ (Try Zen), TS (Take Sominex) or even, in some circles TJ (Take Jesus) - in this sense an icon distantly derived from Jesus Christ, and literally scores of others... and one more cave in the "T" series, TB, turn back, turn back to the past." [Word of God - Word of Earth, p. 65]

Sometimes the most convenient cave is nostalgia, the attempt to turn back the clock to simpler, safer days. Sometimes it is the temptation of ignorance: stop watching the news, reading the paper.

And sometimes the escape mechanism that presents itself to us is religion. We live six days a week with problems hammering away at our consciousness - the environment, international relations, nuclear proliferation, toxic waste, public education, crime, violence, not to mention the anxiety produced by the kind of life we live... pressure at work, pressure to succeed, to keep moving up the ladder, to earn more, do more, be more... and anxiety produced by stressful relationships, or no relationships... So on Sunday morning we're eager for a little respite. We come looking very specifically for a retreat from the moral ambiguity of our world and the harshness of our common life. Who can blame us - and who hasn't experienced it?

The cave, says Davie Napier, is where we all go when we are tired of trying to "cope with the uncopeable." That's what the Elijah story is about... A man weary of coping with the uncopeable... A man who is devastated, discouraged. A man who simply wants out. But God tracks him down.

When Elijah finally reaches his destination, a place safe from the dangers of life - Jezebel's threat, the hatred of his people, the nagging sense of responsibility to be faithful - just when he finds a place completely safe, what he finds is God. And what he is told there is remarkable: "go back - go back the way you came... go back to the very life from which you are trying to escape."

It is a very human dynamic to look for a way out of the challenges and dangers of life. It is as old as this ancient story. And it is as contemporary as Sunday, June 25, 1989. My guess is that all of us know about it personally. And my guess is that some of us are very specif-
ically running away from God. The word of faith is that the God who created us follows us, pursues us, even as we attempt to find the cave, the retreat, the safe sanctuary. The word of faith is that when we try to get away from God's call to life - to live faithfully and courageously in the midst of life - God continues the search, dogs our steps, follows like Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven, will never abandon us, or give up on us.

That's the truth and promise of this old, old story. And it is the deepest truth of the Christian Religion. We believe

God comes to us. We believe God comes and is always coming to us. We believe that 850 years or so after Elijah, the promise was sealed. A life began in a cow stall, was lived in small towns and dusty roads and teeming cities, a life radically lived in the world.

The Good News of the Gospel - which is anticipated by Elijah and his adventure - is that God will come to you, be there for you, love you, not just in the retreat center, the cave, the church on Sunday morning, but where you are in your life: in your kitchen, office, board room, laboratory.

God's summons is not to be faithful by retreating from life, but by living it fully, honestly, faithfully, compassionately and courageously in the world. Jesus said one time: "Whoever would save life will lose it: and whoever will lose life for my sake will find it."

The temptation to hide from life is universal and understandable and as old as Elijah. But the blessed promise of the Gospel is that life is where we will be searched for, and found, and loved and saved.

O God of life and love, we do get tired trying to cope with the uncopeable. We feel weary from the sheer weight of living in such a fearful world. When we try to hide, find us, call us back, give us strength and courage to live fully in the world and help us to know that you are always with us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.